

Humanism and the Gay Community

BY DAVID A. NIOSE

MANY HUMANISTS are somewhat puzzled by gays and lesbians who attempt to assimilate into traditional religious environments. With unambiguous biblical language reflecting archaic attitudes towards homosexuality and prescribing capital punishment as the remedy for it, conservative religion, in particular, would seem to have little appeal for gays. Moreover, traditional religions in general have tended historically to scorn homosexuality or, at best, tolerate it, while the naturalistic, reason-based worldview of Humanism sees homosexuality in its accurate perspective—as a natural orientation that should be accepted as part of the ordinary social order.

Of course, reasons for clinging to traditional religion are complex, usually deeply rooted in psychology and family tradition. Few of us, if we were selecting our religious beliefs in a vacuum, would turn to the ancient dogmas of parents and ancestors. But many tend to feel an affinity for traditional religion chiefly because humans don't make their choices in a vacuum. Heritage weighs heavily and people sometimes maintain bonds with outdated institutions even when rational thinking would dictate otherwise.

Hence, for such reasons, some gays and lesbians attempt to maintain ties with the religions of their forebears. In doing so, they often find that their lifestyle is berated by those religious institutions, and they are made to feel, if not unwanted, not fully accepted. At best, they find support from the more open-minded within the religious community, but this rarely puts them in a position of being esteemed and fully accepted.

The existential reality is that many gays and lesbians simply avoid organized religion altogether. But, unfortunately, few go the next step and openly identify as Humanists, and this failure to assert Humanist identification only strengthens the religious right. Gays and lesbians concerned about the influence of religious conservatism should recognize that the growth of Humanism as a vibrant force in the United States is the religious right's worst nightmare. Religious extremists such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson frequently attack Humanism because they realize that it is a genuine threat to their worldview. And if we examine the basic tenets of Humanism we can see why.

First, a Humanist looks at the world from a natural, as opposed to supernatural, viewpoint. Thus, although tradi-

tional Judeo-Christian religions are founded on the notion that ancient people, thousands of years ago, received special messages from God (messages we now call "prophecy" and "revelation"), Humanists view those arbitrary religious beliefs as outside the scope of reason.

Moreover, unlike most traditional religions, Humanism doesn't claim to have found "Absolute Truth." While acknowledging that there is much that remains unknown and undiscovered, Humanists simply see no need to fill the gaps with superstition. Humanists have high regard for science, and it's no coincidence that many of the great Humanists in recent times have been scientists: Carl Sagan, Stephen Jay Gould, Jonas Salk, and countless others. Still, beyond this scientific base, Humanists also have great appreciation for the arts, literature, and culture. In fact, all aspects of education are considered important to Humanists, as education is essential to understanding the world, improving the quality of life, and advancing society.

Perhaps most importantly, Humanists embrace big-picture thinking. As such, Humanists realize that the human animal has been around for over 200,000 years and that civilization itself has only existed for a tiny fraction of that time. It's no wonder that people around the world are having some difficulties getting along and adjusting, yet Humanists believe cooperation and prosperity are attainable if we work to find common ground through reason.

Hence, as gays and lesbians strive for full acceptance, Humanism should be seen as offering a sound philosophical base for claiming it. Moreover, organized Humanist groups such as the American Humanist Association stand ready to serve gays, lesbians, and others who embrace humanistic values rather than ancient creeds, providing not just a place to share ideas and find support, but also a network of celebrants to officiate at weddings and other life passages. So, although gays and lesbians could opt for that old-time religion in their efforts to gain acceptance, they would be wiser to join with Humanists to blaze a new trail, one that boldly challenges outdated worldviews. ☐

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